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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 ISTANBUL 000401

SIPDIS

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TAGS: [PGOV](#) [PREL](#) [TU](#)

SUBJECT: ARMENIAN PATRIARCH DISCUSSES ONGOING CONCERNS

Classified By: Consul General David L. Arnett for reasons 1.4 (b) and (

d).

11. (C) SUMMARY: Armenian Patriarch Mesrob II believes the run-up to a decision for Turkey on EU accession in December provides the best opportunity in years to get movement from the GoT on a variety of problems faced by minority communities, including church administration and property issues, clerical education, and security concerns. To date Mesrob believes little real change has been effected, although Istanbul police have acted quickly against a website encouraging violent attacks against his community. END SUMMARY.

12. (C) Consul General met with Armenian Patriarch Mesrob II, still recovering from a serious traffic accident, on March 12. Mesrob provided thoughtful insight into the challenges faced by the Armenian Orthodox Community in particular, and minority religions in general, in working with the Turkish bureaucracy. Mesrob remains hopeful that there will be "positive changes in the near future, despite a recent hardening of GoT attitudes in some areas."

How to Keep an Empty Church

13. (U) Under current General Directorate of Foundations (Vakiflar Genel Mudurlugu, VGM) regulations, each church or synagogue in Turkey must have an administering foundation, typically a board of directors made up of parishioners. In areas of Turkey where the population of a given minority is dwindling, it can often be impossible to find the minimum number of people (typically six) needed to administer the church or synagogue foundation in that locality. Should the number fall below the minimum, the VGM eventually takes title to the church or synagogue, and any attached property, ostensibly for the purpose of safeguarding the property.

14. (C) In practice, this safeguarding constitutes, at best, neglect. The VGM has little money for use in the upkeep of vacant churches. In several cases, churches taken over by the VGM were used in ways that were objected to by the minority community. Minority communities have also alleged that VGM officials have used former church properties to enrich themselves or their friends.

15. (U) As a possible remedy to the situation, Armenian and Jewish Community representatives have proposed on several occasions not requiring that board members be resident in the same district (ilce) as the church or synagogue. Though GoT authorities have shown some flexibility, allowing residents of the same province (particularly in Istanbul) to serve on boards of foundations in districts other than their own, this has not extended to Turkey as a whole. Mesrob believes that by allowing board members to serve on foundations elsewhere in Turkey, the churches and synagogues could better address their desire to preserve historically-significant, but not regularly-used, houses of worship.

16. (C) In particular, Mesrob points to the Church of St. Gregory the Illuminator in Kayseri. This church, built in what was believed to be the home town of St. Gregory (who converted the Armenians to Christianity, leading to Armenia becoming the first officially Christian state), has major historical significance for Armenians everywhere. If the VGM were to take over, and then neglect or misuse the property, the Armenian Diaspora would object strenuously and publicly, he believes. Though he has expressed such concerns directly to the GoT, no response has been forthcoming to his proposal for expanding eligibility for foundation board participation.

No Halki for Armenians

17. (C) Mesrob discussed the status of the Ecumenical Patriarchate's negotiations with the GoT on reopening of Halki Seminary. Mesrob believes that such negotiations have reached an impasse because the Greeks want the seminary to be classified as a "vocational school," something which would not/not put Halki under the authority of the Higher Board of Education (YOK). (Note: Vocational schools still fall under the Ministry of Education. Mesrob did not elaborate as to why the government preferred YOK as the appropriate authority.)

18. (SBU) Though the Armenian Orthodox Community also has now-defunct seminaries which it could reopen if it also reached an agreement with the Ministry of Education and YOK, Mesrob says he has no desire to do so. Mesrob says he intends to work with YOK to create some sort of theological faculty which would train future Armenian priests and teachers, as well as outsiders with an academic interest in Orthodox theology, for two years only. He then hopes to send the candidates for the priesthood overseas for further, and more intensive, training.

19. (SBU) Mesrob's attitude is the result of financial concerns. He estimates that reopening a seminary in Istanbul would cost USD 400,000 per year. Sending an average of 8-10 students per year overseas for theological training costs USD 15,000 to 20,000 per student, resulting in a net savings of USD 200,000 to 280,000. Though Mesrob's proposal seems much closer to the Ministry of Education and YOK's wishes, there is no GoT movement to date.

Internet Threats Ended

110. (C) Mesrob had previously raised with poloff security concerns regarding a web site (<http://barbarian.sitemynet.com/PitbuLs/id6.htm> -- now defunct) which gave addresses and telephone numbers for Armenian churches, hospitals, and foundations, along with advice for how to make bombs, when best to attack, and what dates are religious holidays. The site clearly planned to provide similar information in the future for Jews, Suriyanis, and "Ataturk Thought Associations," but had not yet gotten information for these.

111. (C) Mesrob reported that Istanbul police had been very helpful in tracking and identifying the owner of the site, who was arrested and quickly sentenced to three years in prison. Mesrob said that in the past, periodic small-scale attempts at attacking the Armenian Community had been largely unsuccessful, but pointed to a new security gate at the patriarchate as proof of continued vigilance.
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